

# Some Superstitious Beliefs occurring in the Theory and Practice of Malay Medicine.

BY JOHN D. GIMLETTE, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P.

*Residency Surgeon, Kelantan.*

(WITH PLATE VII).

My notes are confined for the most part to the doings of an ordinary Kelantan "bomor" or medicine-man; the extraordinary practices of the "pawang" or wizard are described at length in W. W. Skeat's book on Malay Magic, published by Messrs. Macmillan and Coy., London, 1900.

Both terms are, however, often used as though they were interchangeable. In Kelantan the title of "pawang" is seldom used, the "bomor" is the general practitioner in medicine as well as a specialist in witch-craft and Malay folk-lore.

Without any intention of causing serious harm it is not unknown for Malays to trade on the fears and superstitions of others. For instance, in 1910, a handful of earth was sent to me by the Kelantan police for investigation; it contained some small bones, probably those of a goose, a bit of wax candle, a sprinkling of broken shells and a rusty nail: these had been put into an old metal bowl (bokor), and buried under the bed chamber of H. H. the Sultan to act as witch-craft against the Sultana. A "bomor" from the interior (darat), was implicated and some anxiety was displayed as to whether he had employed the bones of an animal or those of a dead child. Impelled by jealousy a lady of the palace is reported to have persuaded the "bomor" to annoy His Highness in this way.

Sometimes the motive is quite different. A little time ago at Temerloh in Pahang, a small bamboo cylinder was buried on the path leading from a man's house to the river. The cylinder (tabong), contained an addled egg, some porcupine quills, and some other things. It was placed there at the suggestion of a "bomor" attending the son of a head-man. The "bomor" was baffled by the ailment (malarial fever), and seeking to explain by supernatural agency what he could not cure by his own skill, told the head-man that a certain Malay, indicated to him as a personal enemy of the head-man, was responsible for the son's sickness. Thus the "tabong" was buried near the man's house.

Transfixion by porcupine quills is part of a curse invoked by the "pawang" upon wild dogs; two kinds of porcupines are found in the Malay Peninsula, the "landak kawan," *Hystrix longicauda*, and "landak batu," the brush tailed porcupine, *Atherura macroura*. Penetrating wounds made by the quills of both of these are rightly



held by the Malays to be serious from their failure to heal. It is thought by the Malays in Province Wellesley that it is necessary, not only to pluck the quill from the wound as soon as possible, but to plant it, (*tanam-kan duri landak*), in the ground immediately after extraction so as to ensure a speedy union of the wound.

The magic "bezoar" stone is found inside the porcupine, but more often perhaps in the monkey.

In regard to the theory of Malay medicine, taboo is very common among Malays: it is sometimes forbidden by the "bomors" for anyone to enter the house occupied by a sick man or even to approach the dwelling by a particular path. A string (*tali*), with coco-nut leaves hung on it, is often drawn across the path as a notice of "pantang" or prohibition, and fines are levied by the "bomors" for breaking this quarantine.

These native quarantine restrictions are of value in preventing the spread of epidemic disease, more especially Asiatic cholera. In 1910, cholera was epidemic in Kelantan, and I am indebted to Mr. W. H. Mackray, who was Assistant Adviser to the Government at that time, for the following notes. Mr. Mackray says: "I found native quarantine restrictions in full swing in the interior and of two kinds, the "pupoh kampong" and the "pupoh rumah."

The "pupoh kampong" is established for a period of 30 days either in favour of outsiders to an infected "kampong" (village), or in favour of the inhabitants of a kampong that has escaped infection in an unhealthy area.

A "tali pupoh" is stretched across the main path entering the kampong and twists of leaf depend from the string. At either side of the path is stuck a bamboo, the upper end of which is split into a bowl-like shape and contains a young coco-nut and to the stem is tied a fold of betel (*sireh*), and a cigarette (*rokok*).

These are not, as might be thought, offerings to the "hantu penyakit" (spirit of disease), but gifts to the "hantu" (spirit), invoked by the "bomor" to combat the "hantu penyakit," who is not always to be recognized.

The spirit called in to help was in each instance in which I enquired the "hantu raya" (an evil spirit of great power and savagery).

On the near side of the "tali pupoh," a hollow bamboo clapper is hung, and all persons wishing to enter and pass through the village must beat at the clapper and wait for the "bomor" to admit them after a muttered incantation and the scattering of a handful of rice over the passengers. As the "bomor" is not in constant attendance a troublesome delay is caused to travellers, but I thought it well to observe the restriction closely even at the cost of some lost time.

The "adat" payable to the "bomor" by any one found to have disregarded the quarantine (*langgar pupoh*), is cash, two dollars; nasi kunyit (rice cooked with saffron), sa'chupak, (1½



lbs.) ; kain puteh panjang (white cloth), lima hasta, ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  yards) ; pitis sa'kupang (10 cents), and benang puteh (white thread), sa'tukal, (3 skeins).

This "adat" I was obliged to pay on one occasion at Kampong Labu through the stupidity or self assertion of the two police I took with me from Perdah who, (when with the baggage carriers), walked through the Labu "pupoh." Passers-by are not permitted to stay the night in a village under "pupoh kampong."

The "pupoh rumah" (house quarantine), lasts for three days only and excludes all out-siders from the infected house. I induced the "bomors" to lengthen the period to five days.

A curious example of the worst kind of poly-pharmacy is contained in a native prescription for "puru" or "Yaws," a disease which is very prevalent in Kelantan: Take the knee-cap of a tiger, the bones of a duyong, (the dugong), the bones of a goose, the bones and horns of a kambing gurun, *Nemorrhaedus sumatrensis* (a rare wild goat), the horns of a rusa, *Cervus unicolor* (a wild deer), when full grown, (lembong) ; add belerang bang, or realgar (one of the sulphides of arsenic), and chendana janggi (red sandal-wood), and mempūs harimau (a kind of wood). Grind these ingredients down with some boiling rice water (ayer dideh) ; take a small amount of ashes from the hearth, mix, and administer the draught by the mouth.

A "bomor" to H. H. the Sultan of Kelantan, tells me that a universal cure for any native poison can be prepared from the wing bone of a goose, the horn of the wild goat, the spine of the sea porcupine, and various unidentified jungle roots and barks. These are to be rubbed down in hot water and carefully strained before administration.

In the case of snake bite this medicine is to be applied first to the top of the head and then to the wound before the sovereign remedy is swallowed by the patient.

The wearing of a turquoise ring is considered to be a sort of talisman for warding off poisonous snakes. A magic wood from Mecca, the "kayu rajah naga," is sometimes worn with the same idea ; it is a light brown, friable stem which is also applied to the wound as a medicine for snake bite.

A preposterous antidote for poisoning by "ringut" in combination with other poisons, is prepared much in the same way as the universal antidote: it is to take the bones of a whale, the solid casque of a horn-bill (mentua, also burong lilin), the sea porcupine's spine, with a stag's horn and the horn of a rhinoceros.

For poisoning by Cyanide of Potassium, the Malay antidote is somewhat similar and is hardly likely to be at hand in an emergency: take the helmet of the horn-bill (mentua or burong lilin), and the tusk of an elephant, the bones of a dugong (the sea pig), and rub them down with the root of "bunga raya puteh," the white flowered variety of the Shoe Flower, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, L.,



(Malvaceae). Cyanide of Potassium is used by Malay goldsmiths, along with the carbonate of soda and "aqua regia," for the purpose of gilding brass and silver. It is known as "potas" or "obat berchelup mas."

A few days ago misadventure with "potas" occurred in the house of an astute Malay noble who bought a few ounces of it in Kota Bharu with the idea of turning an oxide of iron into an oxide of tin and so possibly of "salting" a mine. During the course of his experiments a fowl pecked at the cyanide, spun round and apparently died, but was saved by an antidote. This was prepared, on the spot, by the wife of the noble in the form of a draught, by rubbing down part of the beak of a small pied horn-bill (paroh burong terbang mentua), with fresh coco-nut milk.

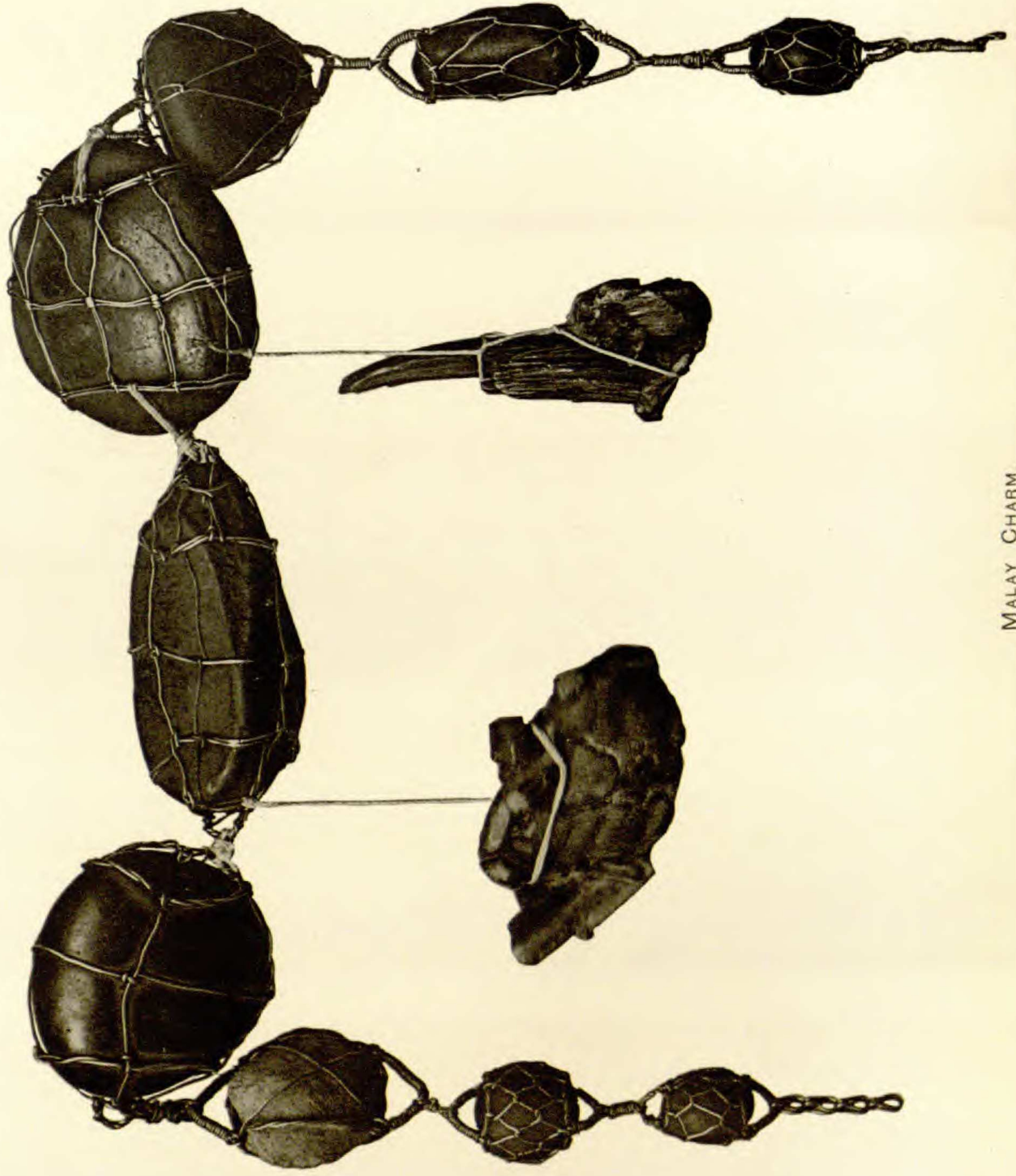
The supposed virtue of the antidote seems to depend mostly on the properties of a solid, yellow, wax-like stuff which is found on the top of the helmet of this particular horn-bill, *Rhinoplax vigil*, (Bucerotidae). The bird is found only in Malaya and is nicknamed by Malays, mentua or "mother-in-law"; the solid part of the bill is sometimes fashioned by them into the form of a small ring and treasured for use in the emergencies of native poisoning. In the case I have recorded the antidote acted as a direct emetic. Broaches and buttons are also made from the solid part of the bill. Skeat refers to the latter as a talisman: "the horn is of a yellow tinge and is made into buttons, which, the Malays say, turn to a livid colour whenever the wearer is about to fall sick, and black when he is threatened by the approach of poison." (Malay Magic, p. 125).

Sometimes one poison is used to counteract another. A genus of fish with very poisonous fins, the "ikan sembilang," (*Plotosus canias*, *P. unicolor*, *P. lineatus* and, perhaps, *P. horridus*), occurs in Malayan waters and curiously enough it occurs as an antidote which is made by steeping the fish bones along with those of a goose in a bowl of water. This antidote is intended to cure baldness caused with criminal intent. The poison for this purpose is smeared over the victim's head during his sleep and is a gummy fluid made by the admixture of an oily decoction obtained by boiling down a cobra, *Naia tripudians*, (Colubridae), in water with a similar decoction obtained by stewing a tortoise in water. The application is said to cause death if untreated by the "bomor."

The use of the "ikan sembilang" among Dyaks as a medicine is recorded by Bishop Hose in his article "The Contents of a Dyak Medicine Chest," (Journ. Straits Branch, R. A. Soc. No. 30, June, 1903, p. 65).

Goose bones are also used, along with the root of the coco-nut poisoning. They are ground down and given together as a draught palm, *Cocus nucifera*, (Palmae), as an antidote to datura in water.







Bile or gall (ampedu), stated to be obtained from various animals, is a common ingredient of many of the cruel and repulsive poisons that are concocted by Malays and which are referred to in another paper entitled, "Notes on Malay Poisons."

The "gall" of a fish, the "ikan buntal," *Tetrodon oblongus*, of a frog, "katak pisang," *Rana erythraea*, Schleg., of two toads, "katak lembu" or "bertandoh," *Megalophrys nasuta*, Schleg., and "katak puru," *Bufo melanostictus*, Schn., the sun bear, *Helarctos malayanus*, a green snake, *Dryophis prasinus*, Boie, the gall of the porcupine, *Hystrix longicauda*, and of two birds, the crow, "burong gagak," *Corvus macrorhynchus*, Wagl., and the racquet-tailed drongo, "burong chawi," *Dissemurus platurus*, are all used in Kelantan as poisons along with many others in different combinations.

Skeat refers to the strange use of the "ikan keli" (Cat-fish, *Clarias magur*) as a poison and antidote combined.

A quaint "adat" or custom occurs in Kelantan for the nefarious collection of datura seeds. It is to light a candle, in mid-day, underneath the plant and separate the seeds from their capsules, (buah buah kechubong), with a split bamboo stick, (perangan), which has already been used in roasting fish over a fire, and so become scorched and charred.

Sir Hugh Clifford has described the horrible wraith of the lying-in-room, in his book, "In Court and Kampong," and illnesses attributed to evil spirits are described by several other authors, especially Blagden and Skeat; the latter describes the ceremony of marking the forehead of the new born infant to preserve it from convulsions and the use of a bracelet called "gelang bajang" to protect Malay children from a familiar spirit in the shape of a pole-cat.

Illnesses attributed to evil spirits are described by several authors, especially Blagden and Skeat; the latter describes the ceremony of marking the forehead of the new born infant to preserve it from convulsions as well as the use of the bracelet called "gelang bajang," to protect Malay children against a demon in the shape of a pole-cat.

Among other amulets which are worn to ward off disease, the "azimat," or written talisman, is the most common, but I found a curious old charm in use in Kota Bharu, only a few days ago, of quite a different character. It was used in the following circumstances as a medicine.

During the "bulan puasa" or fasting month, when no meal is allowed during the day-time until even-tide, a fairly well-to-do Malay went, with his son, a youth, to dine at the house of a friend in Kota Bharu. The two were living alone, because the man's wife was sick and was staying at the sea-side for a few days; in the interim his married sister prepared their evening meals and sent them to the house.



They returned home about 10 p.m., and found a sweetmeat (pisang sira), that had been brought at dusk by a strange girl. The young woman came in a hurry and said the married sister had sent it; the man ate it all except for a small piece that he gave to his son who enjoyed it, but noticed a peculiar earthy taste. They then lay down to sleep and quickly became stupefied; they found they had lost the power of moving their legs, their throats got parched and their heads giddy.

About 4 a.m., thieves broke the door open and plundered the house while their victims, although awake, were unable to rise and protect themselves. The boy managed to strike a match, but stumbled and fell on attempting to get up; the thieves escaped, but the man was able to recognize one of them.

I saw the patients in the morning; both had dilated pupils, inactive to light and there seems little doubt that a preparation containing datura and gadong had been used. The man was still dazed and was lying down on a mat. A bowl of water containing the charm was at his side and he was sipping the water as it was given to him by his mother from time to time.

The charm belonged to an old woman, (the man's mother), who told me that it had been in her family for many years, having been bought a long time ago from an Arab for fifty dollars. The general appearance is reproduced in the photograph which was taken in Kota Bharu with her permission. An imperfect specimen of a fossilized crab and a piece of what appears to be some other sort of fossil were lying loose in the bowl along with the charm.

On examination the charm appears to be mainly a collection of curiously shaped pebbles cleverly strung together by means of silver wire. Taking them from left to right they are described by the owner, in Malay, as follows, from below upwards: (1), "batu buteh nangka," a stone not unlike the pip of the Jack fruit, *Artocarpus integrifolia*, (Urticaceae), (2), "batu dalam prut buaya," a stone probably taken from the stomach of a crocodile, (3), "isi lokan," apparently a fossilized cockle, (4), "buah beluru," a stone not at all unlike the seeds of the big creeper, *Entada scandens*, L., (Leguminosae), in appearance, (5), "batu dalam otak buaya," a stone from a crocodile's brain, but which looks like an ordinary pebble, (6), "buah beluru," a stone similar to No. 4, (7), "buah pinang," a stone shaped like a dried areca nut, (8), "batu dalam prut buaya," the same as Nos. 3 and 5, (9), "batu mata pirus," a greenish blue stone which may be a turquoise.

The fossilized crab, "ketam jadi batu," had been borrowed from a friend for the occasion. The name of the other fossil was unknown; it was purchased by the man's father for seventy dollars many years ago from an uncle of the present Sultan. In colour and appearance it somewhat resembles a bit of candied angelica, *Angelica archangelica*, (Umbelliferae).